

Q: Good morning. Today is April 20th, 2017. My name is Kim Hewitt and I'm here with Maria Puzzanghero. We're at the Newton Free Library, and together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and Newton Senior Center. So Maria, can you tell us what country are you originally from?

A: Italy.

Q: Okay. And why did you leave that country?

A: Well, America looked great, looked big and promising and Italy was all destructed by the war.

Q: How old were you when you left, and did you leave with family or on your own?

A: I was 20 years old and I left there with my mother and two younger sisters.

Q: Can you tell us about your experience leaving the country?

A: Leaving this country?

Q: Leaving Italy.

A: Oh, living in Italy?

Q: Leaving.

A: Oh, when I left...It was very, very hard to leave my country, very, very hard. But there was at the time and the country had been destroyed by the Germans first and the Allied forces after trying to liberate us from the Germans. We were near Cassino, I don't know if you ever heard of that town, Cassino was bombarded and it was not left one stone on top of another, was completely, completely gone. And we were about 15 miles from Cassino so we were under artillery and bombings continuously.

Q: Why did you move to the United States and, specifically, why did you choose Newton?

A: I left in United States like I told you because my country had been destroyed. There was much promise at the time there. Since I was a naturalized citizen, I had to enter the country before the age of 20. In fact, if I'd waited, I would lose the privilege. I traveled with an American passport. I didn't have to go to the island there where--no, I just came to the boat and I got out. There I met family there, my family, my aunt. I was the daughter of an American citizen and the granddaughter of an American citizen. Even though I was born in Italy, I was a naturalized citizen. And I had the privilege to come to this country before the age of 21 as an American citizen. I did travel with an American passport.

Q: And what brought you to Newton and how long have you been here?

A: Well, when I first came I lived in Quincy and from there to go to Boston to work was very, very hard. So after being in Quincy for a few years I moved to Cambridge, it was easier to get work from there. And then from there, when my sister and my mother came we needed a larger apartment, and we were very lucky to find a beautiful apartment in a mansion in Brookline. And we lived there for a few years until I got married. So when I got married, my husband and I--my husband had bought a house in Dorchester, and we stayed there for ten years and then we moved to Newton. We moved to Newton the weekend that President Kennedy was assassinated, and it was a very hard weekend for me. Leaving the house I was comfortable in and I was comfortable

in the neighborhood. Leaving that place and then the assassination of the president did a job on me on that weekend.

Q: Sounds like a lot. What was it like for you when you first arrived in Newton? Do you remember your first day here?

A: It was very nice. I mean the school was--my children were elementary school children and the school was next door to me almost, the Carr School. And the children could walk to there and I met the teachers at Carr School who were very, very nice and, and I really made friends with a lot of them. Living in Newton is probably the best thing that I did in my life.

Q: Can you share a story about your first experience with learning English?

A: Oh yeah. So I arrived in Quincy November. January my cousin had said to me "You know they're doing a program at the high school, evening program, for people do not speak English. So do wanna sign up?" I said sure. So I went to the high school in the evening. While I was on the bus going to the high school I was saying to myself, "How is the teacher gonna teach me English if she doesn't speak Italian?" [Laughter] So I got there to school and I sat there with my book and my pens and very attentive. The teacher walked back and forth in front of us, there was just a few of us, then she turned around and signed her name on the blackboard, and her name was Mrs. McDermott. I could not say McDermott if you paid me a million dollars. And she started teaching, she said "book," "pencil," "chair"--that's how she started. And then those words started working into my mind and I began to recognize them when people would speak about those words. I wanted to learn English the [00:06:09]--that was my priority, learning English was my priority. So after the school in Quincy ended at the end of March, I signed up in Boston, 5 Commonwealth Avenue. They had a school there for people who wanted to learn English or scribe it. Of course, I had to pay for it. I worked in Nealon Street, in a dress factory. [00:06:41] I walked to Commonwealth Avenue twice a week to learn English. I loved the teacher, she was so

good, and that's where I really learned my English. So from seven o'clock in the morning go to work, go to school, I used to get back to Quincy at 11 o'clock at night. Now at 11 o'clock at night the bus went up to Quincy Center and there was no bus going from Quincy Center to West Quincy, so I walked all by myself at night. And I was not afraid. I was not afraid, all alone, I walked alone to get to the house.

Q: What are one or two differences or similarities that you've noticed in the cultures here and in Italy?

A: The culture...that's a good question. Much different, much different, very much so, yeah. I found that people didn't take time to hear other people's problem. And I thought that people are always in a hurry, they were always hurrying and they didn't take the time to ask questions. Now this is one example: in work people say to me in the morning, "Maria, how are you?" And they kept going, they didn't wait for my answer. So I said I'd have to find a different way. The next day, "Maria, how are you?" "I'm okay." "Maria, how are you?" "Not too good today." They kept going just the same, they didn't wait for an answer. It seems to me that people [00:08:50] for themselves, not for other people. That was the impression.

Q: And you told me before about the difference of drinking coffee. Would you mind telling us...

A: Pardon me?

Q: You told me before about people drinking coffee, would you mind telling us that story?

A: When I got off the boat?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes. The boat arrived at New York Harbor at night, so I ran up on deck and in the distance I saw the skyscrapers all lighted up, proclaiming the riches and the power of this country. That really made an impression on me. Next--then I went back down on deck, and the next day the boat approached the harbor and we were told to get off. Now, my aunt was supposed to meet me there so I had a picture with me because I had seen her the last time when I was a child. So I'm looking at the picture and I'm looking at this sea of people--there was an ocean of people, people all over the place. So I said "How am I gonna find her?" [Laughter] But I did. So I got off the boat on what they call the gangplank. You come up in on the gangplank. And I looked around, the sky was pewter color, the sky was hanging down, the sky didn't move. Like in Italy the sky always moves, even if it's cloudy. This were down, pewter color, every, every sky.

I wanted to go back to Italy. Ao I got off the boat and I looked around for my aunt, finally I found her. Then I saw the people were drinking coffee on paper cups. They threw away those paper cups in a barrel, and the barrel was overflowing and the paper cups were all over the place. And I said to myself "These peoples are not neat people." [Laughter] That was quite an experience, yeah.

Q: What are one or two changes that you've made in your lifestyle since you've been here, and have you maintained any traditions from Italy?

A: Well I keep some of the tradition from Italy, of course, and teach them to my family, like making Easter bread, like making different things for Christmas, different food for Christmas. There was another thing that...I arrived here at Thanksgiving, before Thanksgiving, so my aunt and I put a big table like this, full of food. I never seen so much food in my life never, never. So they asked me...What was your question about?

Q: Oh that's okay you can tell the...

A: So I sit down and they put this big turkey on the table Thanksgiving, this was Thanksgiving. I said to myself, we don't eat turkey meat.

[Laughter]

Q: Do you have turkey on Thanksgiving now?

A: It was a big thing and that was okay. What else?

Q: Do you have turkey on Thanksgiving now?

A: No.

Q: What do you make?

A: [00:12:51]

Q: What is that?

A: It's a smaller version of turkey.

Q: So that's a new tradition or is it an old tradition?

A: It's smaller also.

Q: Have you started any new traditions since moving here?

A: Have I started any new traditions since I've been here? Well, yes.

I was a seamstress when I arrived and I worked in a dress factory, but I had been trained in Italy as be a seamstress under really very good tailors. So when I arrived here and I went to work in this factory they recognized my talent. I don't know if this answers your question but I'll get to it. So, one day I was called to by the boss and he said to me, "Maria," "What, am I let go?" "No," he says, "From now on you gonna work in the designing room." "In the designing room?" "Yes, you're not gonna be a union member any more." It took me away from the union because if they gave me that job and they chose me who'd come from the old country I don't even know the other people, whatever, complain to the union. But since they took me away from the union there was no complaining. So I work in the designing room because I could do anything as far as sewing. From a sketch I had to make a dress. And the dress, they brought it around they made duplicates and then they brought it around to try to sell it. The best part was now this was 19--probably 1952, they were paying me \$100 a week! 1950! I couldn't believe it! That's a lot of money in those days. And I loved it, I loved the job. I loved working in the designing room, I really just loved it, yeah.

What was your question again?

Q: Is was about starting new traditions. How about with your family?

A: My family?

Q: Yeah, did you start new traditions with them?

A: With them? Sure. I have four children. The new tradition I wanted to start was I didn't want the Christmas they celebrated here. I remember my cousin going around one day before Christmas with piece of paper and pencil and says, "Maria, what do you want for Christmas?" What do I want for Christmas? I said to him, "I don't want anything for Christmas. Why don't

you ask me what I *need* for Christmas.” And that’s the new tradition I started in my family, not to ask for what you want, but for what you need. And I needed a pair of gloves so bad, it got so cold.

[Laughter]

Q: What were your hopes for yourself and your family when you came here?

A: Hmm?

Q: What were your hopes for yourself and your family when you came here?

A: Well I think most of my hopes were realized. I got this beautiful job paying \$100 a week. I met my husband, and it was the best thing that happened to me. And we got married, and we have four children and we bought a beautiful house in Newton and I moved to Newton [00:16:55] President Kennedy was assassinated and I've been very happy. Newton has a lot to offer, you have to look for it, but Newton has a lot to offer, yeah. And I..then I joined a story telling people. I'm a storyteller, let me tell you. [Laughter] I've told stories throughout--all over the place. I told them, I don't know if you have the Katja book with you.

Q: Not with us, we have it at the library.

A: Their story, I was at the University of Massachusetts in Boston was having a conference, Italy in the Holocaust, called. And they called me, somebody gave my name, would I go and talk to them. “Sure,” I said, “I'll come and talk to you.” I didn't know there were gonna be 500 people there. And so I went there and I told the Katja story that all of you know probably. 500 people were there. I had a standing ovation.

After I was done, I called Katja, the heroine of the book, she lives in Italy now, she's Jewish girl, woman now. I asked her to come. I said Katja, you gotta come and stand near me. She says, "Maria, I can't, I can't take any time off again." I mean she was a professor there in Rome. "Okay, if you can't, you can't." Two days later, she said "Pick me up at Logan airport." And she came and we both stood on the stage and I told her story, which is in the Katja book. And so that was the beginning of the storytelling for me, I've been storytelling all over the place. Of course, Italians like to speak.

Q: How was your idea of America the same as what--the reality that you found when you came?

A: Some, not all, yeah. Of course the American so many different people that come from all over the country, so. I find it hard they didn't take time to really ask good questions. I see that they were always in a hurry. But you go by one day and they say, "Maria, how are you today?" And I say, "Yeah, I'm fine," and they keep on walking, fine. One day I said, "Maria, how are you today?" and I said, "Not too good." They kept on, they kept walking, they didn't ask me what's wrong with you. So that was one thing that I didn't think was too good. I don't know maybe it's because we are from different nationalities and so on, you know that makes it hard.

Q: Yeah, it could be. What was the most important and meaningful experience in your life?

A: The what?

Q: What was the most important and meaningful experience in your life?

A: Well, having my four children. They are the essence of my life. Two boys and two girls. My husband died very young, so I've been widowed now for around 40 years, so that was tough. But I have the most beautiful children, two boys and two girls, and seven grandchildren.

Q: Congratulations. Can you think of one or two common values or beliefs that would help the people in the United States to understand your culture from Italy?

A: You mean the people who come in or the people who have been there already?

Q: People who are just around in the U.S. that might not understand Italian culture. What are one or two things that you--

A: Oh, you want me to tell Italian culture?

Q: Yeah, what are one or two common things that you would want people to know to help understand Italian culture?

A: I think that maybe because I came from a very small mountain village, I did not live in a city, the people there were very good in helping each other. They all went out of their way to help each other, and that's what I would like to see in this country more. But it's hard here because we don't live so close, you know. Like the car, you get in the car and you go. Before the car we used to go to a bus stop and meet our friends. Now that's gone. We should get a little more together and get to know each other.

Q: And what advice would you give to someone who is moving here from Italy?

A: First of all learn the language. That's a priority. Then learn the Constitution of the United States. Be good to your neighbors.

Q: That's very good advice. Do you have any other experiences you want to share with us that we didn't cover?

A: Yeah, they probably will come to my mind tomorrow. What other experience? I've had a lot of experience.

What I really liked about the storytelling, do you want me to tell them? There was going to be a conference in Jonesboro, Tennessee. It was going to be a national storytelling. So I went. And there were about ten thousand people coming from all over the United States. I was fortunate to know somebody there that I was able to be with them, otherwise I don't what I would've done, but anyhow. To listen to all the stories that the people had to say, there were 10,000 people there. They had tents and the audio system was so good you could not think I'll miss anything. That's an experience that I would like to have people do, if they have the time to do it and so on.

Storytelling has given me so much. First of all, I was able to tell some of the things that I was thinking about. Then I was able to tell the Katja story, which is a story that I want everybody to read, because that's a story that I don't want it to happen again, ever. We have to understand the different nationality, the different customs that people have. And not ridicule them or [00:24:37], but try to understand them, try to understand where they come from and what they do, what their background is. But...like with the storytelling you can tell story about almost anything you want to. You write it down, and you...I just got through writing about...“A Procession of Stories.” I don't know if you read the book.

Q: We have it here.

A: Yeah. Something like that is very good because you talk about what happened to you growing up and the different places, and people can really learn from the book the experience that I had. I would like to read another book--write another book, and I'm beginning to talk about women who have been left by their husbands by no fault of theirs. I think there's a big need for that, there's a big need for that. People are left by their husbands, or their children, and men go, and if they remain in their own town there are people who say, “Oh, the husband left her because she

was not good.” Now that's so wrong. So I want to bring to the light this story about these women, they have been left by themselves. There's a lot of them.

Q: Yes.

A: There's a lot of them.

Q: Sounds like a good project. Yeah. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time.

Q: You're very welcome.

A: We're so happy to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project. Thank you.

Q: You're welcome.

After formally finishing their interview, the participant shared another story, which will follow without introduction here.

A: So then they sent them there, okay. Two and a half years old, her brother three and a half years old. When the German soldiers came to run them out, they were taking this little girl with the brother and the mother. The mother was holding them both, and they marched into the gas chamber, the three of them. They didn't take the father with them because the father spoke many languages, and they needed him. We can't have this happen again.

Q: Yeah, we cannot.

A: So many things. So when the Germans came to run them out, my mother said to them run, run up in the mountains, run up in the mountains, and stay near a trail that the people from here,

they'll bring you blankets, food, and everything you need. So, Ula, Marco, Misha, Leon and Mira, five of them ran up on the mountains, and the people from the town brought them blankets and food and they were saved. If they stayed in the town they would have been picked up. So my mission is to--about the Katja book, to educate people about this, because we don't want this to happen again. Because one day is the Jews, the next day is the Italians, next time it will be somebody else.

Q: Thank you for the work that you've done.

A: You're very welcome. I'm glad I was able to do it.

END OF INTERVIEW